

accessed her on my quantum PDA, one sulphurous, tropical night on Avenue Lane Xane, ever after to dream that she would one day walk through the walls of my bedroom; that, like an angel, she had come to set me free; and if I had then recognized her as one who was at once nobility, elevation, beauty, life, I would later recognize her as one who was also an angel of death. Back in England, surreptitiously logging onto her site – watching her movies, hearing her songs, speaking to her – I knew my stepfather had to die. Dahlia had said so.

“It’ll be dark all the time, soon,” I said. “The winter’s almost here. Daylight’ll be for no more than a few hours. Then we’ll find Cythera and we can be together always.”

Each morning, finding myself in my bedroom, a datacap encasing my head, I had known that she was still on the other side, a vactress, a creature of the fibresphere, that a prick of a hypo in my neck, a rush of information – images enhanced by the little dream machines that twiddled the knobs and switches of my consciousness – had had me following a prompt.

I had had to download her; I had had to run away...

The future, even if mythical, was all we had; the past, too, was just another penitentiary.

I felt an arm under my own; as I was helped to my feet I discovered that I myself was crying.

“We all want to go to Cythera, effendi. I am Baptiste. Come I’ll show you to a room.”

Later, as I tried to sleep between spells of sneaking to the window, opening the chromium blinds to scour the streets for signs of pursuit, I lay on the mattress, trawled the cold, dark currents of my mind, all memories but one eluding me, from abyss to abyss the flux of selfhood but for that bright engram of patricide, lost.

When I awoke I was staring into the face of the man I had killed 15 years earlier. He stood at the foot of my bed, Raybans completing an ensemble of black robe and surcingle worn over heavy-duty thermoware; his natural rotundity, thus supplemented, presented a grotesque caricature, a dream-like exaggeration of the gross, ever-looming figure that had plagued my childhood; I closed my eyes; reopened; but unlike ghosts, dreams cannot so easily pass from world to world; my stepfather was horribly corporate and was levelling a double-barrelled handgun at my head.

“Sorry, effendi, you should have told us. Everybody here done time enough. We can’t harbour no trouble-makers.” Pimp uno withdrew to a corner of the room.

“I told you that watching so much violence would end in tears.”

“I killed you.”

“You *tried* to kill me.” He pulled down his collar and displayed the scars of several puncture wounds. “No; I’m not a spook I’ve never had my 15 minutes of fame! But you cannot so easily be rid of me. Your stepfather will always be with you. Until the end of time.” The fat gauleiter laughed, turning to Baptiste.” Ran away when he was eleven. Picked up in under 48 hours.”

“I, I –” My childhood stutter had returned. I groped, seeking a screwdriver. But the only screwdrivers were

in my stepfather’s eyes as he turned to gimlet me with his stare; still he maintained his conversation with our audience of one. “Good parents. Rich too. His other father was an ambassador. Retired after we broke off relations with Laos and Vietnam. And both parents now dead. At least they’ve been spared further disappointment.” He reached down towards my throat; but instead of throttling me he gripped the blanket and pulled it free of my hands; threw it onto the floor with an inquisitorial flourish, so that I lay revealed, as I had done similarly on other murky nights, naked but for my underwear, my secrets all his. Paralysis spread from my tongue to my body, my arms and legs; overcame me, as it would do when I was a child. “We publicized his crime as murder to bolster public support – to allow us to expand our surrogate parenthood. Would that you boys had had such a program: it might have saved everybody a lot of trouble. But with no one to keep you from re-sin-ning, well...”

“You not censor us here,” said Baptiste, “you have no jurisdiction. Just take him and go.”

My stepfather sat down on the bed, took a small torch out of his pocket. “And still playing with ghosts?” he enquired into my ear. “I expect better from a European boy.” He prised open an eye and brought his own eye close. “Yes, I can see it. The alien. Still burnt into your retina. Still alive and well after all these years.” Suddenly, he clasped me by the temples; shook my head. “Out, out demon. Thing of violence and pornography. Leave this child alone.” He released me; I crashed back into the pillow. And then I felt a hand, cold, wet, against my thigh. “Return him to the purity of his original innocence. Let him be reintegrated into our family.”

“Enough.” Baptiste tried to invest his voice with such weight as he had displayed when talking with me. “You may continue this talk after you leave Antarctica.”

“You realize I have the co-operation of your local militiamen?”

“You think they like helping you? Don’t press luck. I want you to leave, effendi. Now.”

“I want his ghost as well, you understand?”

“Dahlia – no!” I yelled. “On Earth2 she has a wicked ste, ste, ste, *stepmother!*” He grabbed my hair and pulled me into a sitting position.

“She has to be sent back. Even as I’m going to send you back to Boys’ Town. She’s an illegal.” He stood up, pulling me with him. The gun behind my ear, he walked me to the door. Baptiste lead us into the corridor. From downstairs I heard his gang of pimps touting for custom:

“*Consensual hallucination - it’s passé!*”

“*Welcome to ghost land!*”

“*Cyberspace gives way to fibrespace!*”

“*See the Creatures of The Wound!*”

“*Optikoids, self-assembled from the stuff of the fibresphere, from machines so small they are little more than points of light!*”

“*See the scintillant ones!*”

My stepfather grimaced. “Such depravity. There must always be rules of desire. A ghost is an enemy...

movies as expressive of an overdetermined set of anxieties about nuclear war, bureaucratic alienation, communism and post-war gender re-alignments. William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* has become the most academically discussed science-fiction book of recent years because it connects to discussions about that mysterious and frustrating cultural category, postmodernism. But as a whole, the genre of science fiction has not yet had produced for it what might be called an academic *protocol of reading*, a formalized way of directing students to what it is *really* about, beneath the surface. And without that protocol, all important “critical distance” is not attained: the “serious” student finds him- or herself elided with the *fan*. And we all know what fans are like. “Fans? Too mild a word. Rabids. Enthusiasts with foam round their mouths,” as Iain Sinclair puts it in his novel *Radon Daughters*. In short, science fiction remains embarrassing. Is this, then, the discomfort that Ballard produces? And does this account for the antagonism between academia and the unique fan-base of science fiction?

In part, but we should also look to America, where the situation is somewhat different. Since 1973 the august academic journal *Science-Fiction Studies* has provided a space for informed discussion and the work of establishing a definition of science fiction protocols. *Extrapolation*, which began as a fan magazine, is now published by Kent State University Press. Important writers like Samuel Delany and Norman Spinrad hold teaching positions in prestigious universities. Hundreds of courses on sf run in departments across the country. Science fiction cannot be romantically declared “outside” the clutch of the academy. Yet even here, in institutionalized form, Ballard’s position is precarious, uneasy. Ballard has never won a major science-fiction award and this finds reflection in the *problem* that he constitutes for the formalized study of sf. The nature of the unease was quickly set by the early reception of Ballard’s first novels in the “global disaster” sequence. Novels clearly written within an identifiable sub-genre (after the novels of John Wyndham and John Christopher, amongst others), both James Blish and Algis Budrys used their reviews to warn readers of their perversion of the generic norm. Rather than the usual peculiarly comforting destruction of the old order followed by the eventual triumph of technology and the humanistic will to survive, here were texts that seemed to veer between passive acceptance of disaster and even (in *The Drowned World*, *The Crystal World* and stories like

“The Voices of Time”) willed submission to death. As Ballard’s experiments in the 1960s developed, Blish returned to the “stories” of *The Atrocity Exhibition* to muse that “the plain blunt fact is that we do not yet know what it is that Ballard is talking about.” Once *Crash* arrived, everything was over: this was a text the science-fiction critic Peter Nicholls suggested was “advocating a life-style quite likely to involve the sudden death of yourself or those you love.” This is a process a little like allowing a temporary visa to a strange visitor, initial unease, growing horror, and then a rapid march to the border for definitive expulsion.

If the section of the academy that considered science fiction worthy of study at first followed this line, the readings of Ballard’s work have radically altered over the years, to the extent that critics like Warren Wagar and Gregory Stephenson now interpret the early novels not as concerned with literal death-wish, but as metaphorical attempts to transcend the mundane restrictions of bodily existence and quotidian temporality. All those stories of surrendering everyday logic to find a new existence “beyond” death, all those images of flight and transformation, are concerned with a triumphant assertion of re-configured life. At the same time, Ballard has been revived as a source for the emergence of cyberpunk, and has been connected to debates on postmodernism – especially so given that one of the key texts that set the terms of the debate over postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, contained a chapter on Ballard’s *Crash*. Rehabilitation, then? Hardly: the narrative of transcendence still relies on a perverse reading of perverse texts which do too much damage to the tenets of technology and humanism so central to science fiction, and the cyberpunkists and postmodernists really only have interest in *Crash* or, at a push, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. They have little to say about the rest of Ballard’s work. That body of texts – huge, diverse, obsessional, perverse, repetitive – remains an anomaly, a problem, for science fiction.

I am outlining here a strange scenario. On the one hand, academics equate the name of Ballard with science fiction, a genre that has not as yet gained full legitimacy even in the expanded field of literary studies. On the other hand, Ballard is an uncomfortable presence in science fiction, at once central (since all histories of the genre must pass through the moment of the New Wave of which Ballard, as Moorcock once pronounced, was “The Voice”) and marginal, perverse, aberrant. In the binary terms of sf/main-

stream Ballard exists to be located in one place only to be immediately displaced to the other side. What to do with his texts? What frames are available to render his work readable? Outside the “specialist” treatments of sf criticism, one strategy of containment is a process of selection: a text like *The Unlimited Dream Company* can suddenly emerge as a contribution to magic realism, an honourable genre (as Malcolm Bradbury suggests); better, *The Atrocity Exhibition* can be cross-referenced to other experimental fictions of the 1960s like Thomas Pynchon; better still, *Empire of the Sun*, as autobiography and war novel, can be safely considered outside science fiction and become the confessional piece which finally explains why a writer with such obvious talent began writing sf texts in the first place: it was the trauma of war which produced such strange behaviour. All of these strategies, however, desperately seek to insert Ballard texts into pre-determined non-sf genres; none do justice to his work.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued that the institution of literary studies is one obsessed with “the whole problematic of judicial framing and the jurisdiction of frames.” Perhaps I’m demonstrating that obsession; perhaps, too, I’m merely rehearsing that common complaint about science-fiction writers failing to be considered at their proper worth. But my little experiment with Ballard in the classroom is designed to make none of these points. Rather, his fugitive insertion into a course on Concepts of Literature aims to discomfort and disorient students not about how to distribute texts within frames, but about the very *act* of framing. Ballard has spoken about “the odd feeling I had of the Academy closing around me, of the plywood partitions of the Modern Literature department being erected around my desk.” But what fascinates me about Ballard is not his simple *evasion* of these partitions so much as how his work *exposes* the operation of those partitions and the judgments they enable. We could not do without such frames, yet Ballard’s work discomforts, I suspect, because his texts will not let literary or generic or value-framings do their work silently. They expose the laws of inclusion and exclusion, “high” and “low” literature, science fiction and mainstream, by the constant troubling displacement they cause. The point for me is not to attempt to fix the weird mobility of his work across and between categories or to salve the anxiety this induces, but rather to track the peculiar effect this movement has on frames of judgment that are meant to be invisible mechanisms of determin-